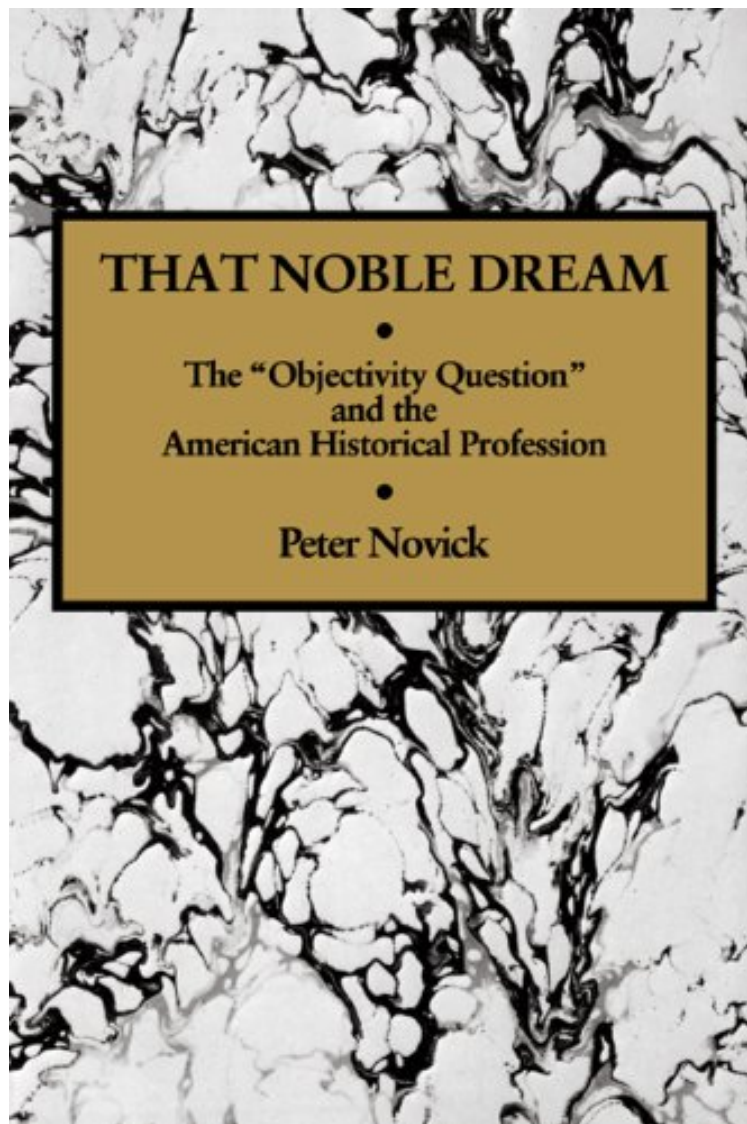


[Ebook pdf] That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession (Ideas in Context)

## That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession (Ideas in Context)

Von Peter Novick

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**Von Peter Novick : That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession (Ideas in Context)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession (Ideas in Context):

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Outstanding chronicle of the American historical profession  
Von Ein Kunde  
"That Noble Dream" is Peter Novick's magisterial history of the American historical profession and its alternating romance and disaffection with "objective" historical scholarship from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s. The German historical profession with its domineering Herr Professor and impressive array of analytical "techniques," Mr. Novick tells us, provided the initial model for American historiography. In Leopold von Ranke, young American scholars found a paragon of "wissenschaftlich" (interpreted as scientific) empirical scholarship. (Oddly, Ranke was neither a strict empiricist nor particularly scientific in his approach to writing history.) Transferred to the other side of the Atlantic, a mythical interpretation of German historiography served to legitimate an inductive, empirical approach to history that purported to uncover the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen" -- the way it actually was. Eschewing both hypothesis and epistemological speculation, American historians enthroned "objectivity" as the goal of their infant profession. Mr. Novick explains that the ideal of objectivity was reinforced by an ideologically homogenous group of professional historians who used objectivity as the yardstick for career advancement and as a "prophylactic against conflict" within their ranks. Among other convictions, it was firmly believed that objective scholarship would serve to protect American students from the evils and distortions of propaganda. It was not long before a reaction developed against these pseudo-Rankean "data gatherers," as they pejoratively came to be known. In the years before the Great War, the new progressive historians (notably Beard and Becker) questioned the idea of cold, indisputable facts and thereby planted the seeds that later would grow into the antithesis of objective scholarship, namely relativism. The new historians were denoted, somewhat unkindly, as "presentists," because of their use of history for the purpose of progressive reform. With the entry of the United States into the the first World War, objectivity was unceremoniously displaced by propaganda, as America's historians were expected to display a sufficiently patriotic fervor. The profession of the interwar years witnessed the rise of cultural and cognitive relativism in the wake of the new scientific ontology. The quest for certainty and absolutes gave way to the "pragmatic tradition," which saw truths as multiple and perspectival. Becker and Beard, together with their loyal vassals, derided the old-school, inductive approach, which claimed that "facts spoke for themselves." But World War II initiated a renewed courtship between the profession and its first love. With the rest of American society, historians turned "toward affirmation and the search for certainty." A considerable dosage of moral rearmament, it was believed, would be required to counter the fascist threat, and historians, like others, queued up to the podium in order to denounce the menace of moral relativism. The totalitarian leviathan, of course, did not disappear after 1945, and Communism proved as good a reason to denigrate relativist epistemology as had fascism. The Cold War, Mr. Novick suggests, "was directly related to the celebration of objectivity as the hallmark of thought in the Free World." Once again, it was claimed that the newly objective, non-ideological historiography, as incorporated into western civilization courses, would insulate young minds against propaganda. Such is a very compacted version of Mr. Novick's copiously detailed narrative of American historiography (complete with all the gossip on your favorite college history professor) and its flirtation with objectivity down to the Cold War. So have we come full circle? One might be inclined to think so if the story ended there. But the book's final four chapters chronicle the American historical profession of the last generation, during which, according to Mr. Novick, the structural supports of objectivity, namely universalism, nationalism, and professionalism, came under attack. A "separatist consciousness" fragmented black history and women's history into ruthlessly guarded sub-disciplines of their own. The profession became "little more than a congeries of groups" that could no longer communicate with each other in mutually comprehended terms. Fueled by a massive production of scholarly works, fragmentation and specialization proceeded at such a pace that by 1980 "in no other discipline did holders of a Ph.D. have less in the way of a common experience." As a consequence, meaningful discussion of the objectivity question on a profession-wide basis "effectively collapsed." What Mr. Novick describes is, in his view, nothing short of a crisis. He points to a handful of "ecumenists," David Hollinger and Thomas Haskell among them, who attempted to identify an "epistemological vital center" in an effort to bring together a chaotic array of hyper-relativists and hyper-objectivists. Alas, he says, precious few were listening. Mr. Novick's historiographical Weltanschauung is bleak indeed. Toward the end of "That Noble Dream," he presents a contradictory image of some "cosmopolitan," "supra-disciplinary" historians moving beyond traditional boundaries toward a new, universal approach to scholarship, while other historians seek shelter behind the new boundaries of fragmented subcommunities. Interdisciplinary centripetal forces are juxtaposed against intradisciplinary centrifugal forces. Within the profession the "center cannot hold," while outside the profession, a new universalism is being forged. Can a new common interest replace the objectivity question as a unifying force within the discipline or at least among several disciplines? Though well over 600 pages long, Mr. Novick's book contains a relative paucity of discussion pertaining to teaching. Certainly the multiple needs of students transcend the single need to be protected from propaganda. Perhaps this issue might be capable of bringing together divergent groups of the profession, if only to disagree. The recent debate over the national history standards suggests that America's historians might do well to think very hard about how best to reconnect scholarship with pedagogy. Were it to fail in this essential mission -- in effect a mission to convince the public that history has value and meaning -- the profession might likely revert to what Mr. Novick describes in the first pages of

his thoughtful book, that is an association of amateurs. Robert Ganem (rganem@nea.org)

**Kurzbeschreibung**The aspiration to relate the past 'as it really happened' has been the central goal of American professional historians since the late nineteenth century. In this remarkable history of the profession, Peter Novick shows how the idea and ideal of objectivity were elaborated, challenged, modified, and defended over the last century. Drawing on the unpublished correspondence as well as the published writings of hundreds of American historians from J. Franklin Jameson and Charles Beard to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Eugene Genovese, *That Noble Dream* is a richly textured account of what American historians have thought they were doing, or ought to be doing, when they wrote history - how their principles influenced their practice and practical exigencies influenced their principles.

**Pressestimmen**'A brilliant and fascinating book.' Laurence Veysey 'A judicious appraisal of men and circumstances, erudite and wide-ranging. Irreverent but not nastily irreverent, with an admirable delicacy of touch.' William H. McNeill 'An astute and provocative account of how the historical profession in America has dealt with its founding myth and central norm - the ideal of objectivity.' Dorothy Ross

**das Produkt**In this remarkable history of the profession, Peter Novick shows how the idea and ideal of objectivity were elaborated, challenged, modified, and defended over the last century.